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The Secret Word

Driven by the taunts of ragtag friends, Buzz threw in to an informal football game, hoping his Cecily might wander by. "You're too sweet on her! Be with the fellows sometimes! Why she's making you into a regular sweetie-boy!" elbowed Josker Albright as they walked back to their side of the ball after a chaotic play, the other team jeering. The shirtless Buzz halted a moment to squint, his face green from the brilliance off the grass. He was trying to find her in the bleachers, and the jeers intensified now, with his name being hooted by players from both sides. Some began squealing *Cec-i-LEEEEEEE!* When Josker flipped the ball to him after another botched play, he added, winking, "Give her something to think about, Buzz, old man!"

The *something to think about* proved to be the uncoordinated Roger Reddington de Graf, who stopped by 16 Songbird Lane with orange chrysanthemums, jerking alongside them in the blinding sunlight as the slim Cecily flung open the white doors.

Buzz had to start engineering at Lehigh University that next week; Roger stayed in Stroudsburg to help his father sell Fords. Unknown to Buzz, he devoted the rest of his time to Cecily.

Unknown to Cecily, Buzz threw himself into beer drinking and the local girls who shared that activity--often cleaning him up afterwards. On the verge of flunking out two months into the semester, he began sending a series of cards to Cecily, usually showing couples in fog, either among ancient forests, or on beaches crowded with driftwood. The verses of these cards his roommate, nicknamed Drunk, labeled *muzz-fuzz-haiku-y-looie*.

*moon on the pond
and then.....
a stone.....
and many moons*

*my footprints
yours.....
two paths.....
one,
to.....eternity.....*

*a heartbeat
a shudder
a silence
of flowers*

Buzz chose not just these artistic expressions, but others of more pedestrian strain.

*Thinking of You...
Just a note to say
You're one who's not forgot.
Sorry there's been some delay
'cause I care for you a lot!*

*I know I'm not clever.
That much I have to say.
But a true friend is forever,
For this and every day!*

Towards the end of first semester, after a brutally dry period of hitting the books, Buzz catapulted back to the local girls. He had spent Thanksgiving break at the house of Drunk's parents in suburban Philadelphia, and for Christmas vacation had joined his own parents at an aunt's retirement village near St Augustine--zero chances to see Cecily.

No more cards were dispatched until Valentine's Day, when for some reason he sent a comic one in the shape of a gold key.

*Hey why not open that trunk?
AND LET MY HEART OUT!!!!!!!!!!!!!!*

A little like a shellshock victim clamping onto an obscure faith, and after he and three town girls--an intense week each--had gone through each other, Buzz finally got around to writing Cecily his one heartfelt, if circuitous, note: somehow begging that she help him reform while he, presumably, awoke her sexually. It had been immediately, too, after religion had swept in, prompted by a revival meeting in which Dean of Men, Dr Brendenhof had strongly recommended to him. Buzz had been saved and afterwards met over hot cider and cinnamon donuts the one local girl, Gladys Alderfelder, who knew she could tame him.

"I told my mother about you," she informed Buzz a few days later, "and she's says you're oversexed and should see a doctor, that young men can ruin themselves and never have a good career. You'll never be a good engineer, Buzz, 'cause that's all you think about."

That one sincere note to Cecily had arrived after her elopement with Roger Reddington de Graf, and she eventually sent it back with all the cards, and a tissuey note saying *Dear Dear Buzz, The reasons one marries can't just be that one and that one alone.* She had written from her brand new home on the lake, full of the antiques Roger's mother had given the couple.

After college, Buzz worked as a designer and model maker for The Foothills Toy Company, owned, strangely enough, by the Pocono Mountain area's most flagrant Socialist, Bret Hansen, who became very fond of the apolitical Buzz.

He retained the bundle of cards Cecily had sent back and eventually rubber-banded it when the lavender ribbons disintegrated. His up-front wife, Evvy, whom he had met at a toy industry convention in Harrisburg, had already proclaimed, and more than once, "Your past aint my business and vice versa--if you're one of them to get jealous notions." Buzz kept the cards and Cecily's note in a locked desk drawer, and actually did get jealous thinking of what Evvy may have been hiding, making a fruitless search one night when she was at her canasta group.

After ten years or so, Roger Reddington De Graf and Cecily bought a one-third interest in the toy company, on the very day Buzz was hospitalized with a hernia after lifting the clay model of Monstro-Robot.

Cecily and Roger, upon reading of his hospital stay in THE POCONO MESSENGER, sent him a card of a cartoon man, very bony, swathed in bandages and on crutches, surrounded by broken machinery and

scrawny dogs.

*I might be
too old to cut the mustard seein'
all this rout,
but I'm still full of beans
and sauerkraut!*

He visualized her at sixteen by the moonlit lake, and repeated quietly from his hospital bed, "How many moons? O how many moons?" Nurse Lucille Nitti overheard. "Yeah and lots of water under the dam too, huh, Honey? You do b.m. yet, Honey?"

"I will inform you," he pronounce firmly.

"I like the sound of that, Honey!" she fluffed the pillow around his rigid head.

The years, and the moons, flew, and the couples had each a late child, Gwen for Buzz and Evvy, and Roger Jr. for Roger and Cecily. Both Dads were thirty-three. The children went to different schools and ultimately attended the University of Pennsylvania, but never met, either there or in Stroudsburg.

On Buzz's fiftieth birthday old man Hansen suffered a fatal heart attack, and diehard Socialists from all over the country attended the funeral. He made provision in his will for Buzz which the New York lawyer had to explain several times: "You must immediately retire, and then you receive a generous monthly stipend for the rest of your life." As Buzz shook his gray head, the lawyer explained further that Hansen felt that his heirs and the other owners might, he quoted him, *"sell out to sharpies. And the first thing they do in the land of the brave is to raid the pension fund."*

"That sure sounds like him," offered the shaking Buzz.

The lawyer shrugged, a grim young man dressed Wall Street, save for a blood-red cravat.

Had Buzz kept a diary the sole entry for the seventh year after retirement might have read: *Roger takes over toy company completely and milks it, sells most of the patents to the Japanese.* The one for the eighth year would read *My Evvy dies shoveling snow.*

After Evvy's death he sold the house and contents at auction and went to Florida to live in Coral Gables near his daughter, Gwen, who taught ballet at The University of Miami.

That very year they cut the dancing program, so she's off to Tulane with Carlos, who had been rewiring her Coconut Grove studio. (He did, in fact, show plans to Buzz who told him "You don't have to draw me a diagram.")

After they leave, it proves cheaper living in Miami Beach, but the angry faces of many of the other retired people irritate Buzz. Sweetness, the black counter boy at Wolfy's consoles

"They're all New Yorkers and they grew up snapping at each other about business. Only now they got tans. And no business. Don't take it serious. People are the same under all the styles."

Roger dies, and THE POCONO MESSENGER featuring the front page obituary touting that civic leader also contains an article about senior citizens sharing houses.

Buzz finally moves back to Stroudsburg to a shared house owned by a Mrs Lahr, where he is greatly appreciated, being, among other thing, Friday's cook. Another of the sharers, Miss Meniffie, asserts "I always look forward to Friday!" It's nice for her to say, but for some reason things begin slipping. *Anybody can do Chili Burgers* admits Buzz to himself. *Maybe I'm getting too old to cut the mustard*--which brings back the silly card Roger and Cecily had sent him so many years ago.

In the back of his mind he has thought of contacting Cecily after a decent interval. Such a time has long passed when he sends a birthday card on a whim.

He had walked to the mall and was out of breath reaching *The Little Card Shoppe*, a franchise operation in the throes of a nationwide promotion, and therefore full of metallic balloons which moved about in the air currents and kept bumping him.

"May I help you?" inquired a gum-chewing young woman in very elevated, sharply clicking heels. Her badge read Merrie, Assistant Manager.

"Yeah, stop stocking all these gushy cards. And I'm coming in here with a pin next time!" She, amused, led him noisily through the balloons to a spin rack labeled TASTEFUL CONTEMPORARIES. He eventually chose a card featuring a black and white photo of a blind man with a cane who sported, though, huge orange sunglasses. *"Hey! Long time no see I gotta say..."* read the caption snaking from his mouth, and then inside the card, a platinum

blond in a mink cape and nothing else kicked up her orange heels, a bottle dangling from one hand and a down-turned champagne glass in the other.

*but feel free
to have yourself one HELL of a birthday!*
She was a kind of pink soft-sculpture of amazingly elastic flesh.

The day he mails the card, one crocus breaks through ice on the tiny lawn of the post office. A week later a note comes back signed by Jacqueline Naismith, Social Services.

*We are honored to say that Cecily is a guest
here at Bide a Bit now. She asked me to report that
she'd sure love a visit!!!!!!!!!!*
He goes and is confronted by a muttering, prematurely old woman in a wheelchair in front of a bright window, wisps of pale hair brilliantly vibrating, her flesh pink and purple, hands spasmodic, jumpy. Before he can speak, she warns of the Pennington boys as he is holding her icy hands down. They had been stealing, he gathers, riotously digging up bulbs too, and going wild on the garden swing. Actually, he had walked by that house on the lake earlier, only to see a comic wrought iron sign featuring two doctors over a mound-like patient and the legend THE GYNECOLOGISTS SPEISENGLASS.

Cecily stops talking and stares at Buzz for many moments, her eyes bluer, and younger, than he can remember. "Are you Roger?"

"Roger is, was, you husband. I'm your old friend, Buzz."

Fat Roger Jr enters and Buzz drops Cecily's hands. Roger wears a too-tight blazer with a FORD logo, open, his shirt beginning to spill out the front like spent sheets from a motel cart.

"I'm Buzz." Buzz extends his hand.

"Isn't everybody?" counters Roger Jr who storms into a monolog about not being able to depend on his new service manager. "Now don't let her pull that forgetfulness crap on you either," he suddenly shouts from nowhere. "These guerilla fighters of the Alzheimers Brigade aren't above a little manipulation."

"She's been just fine," assures Buzz.

"Say, you worked for the toy company, didn't you? I saw you in some old photographs in the mess of my father's estate.

That was one lulu of a communist used to own it, wasn't he?

So you, especially, shouldn't be so rough on my Dad. He was fine until..."

and Roger Jr nods in the direction of silently chewing Cecily. "Huh! She eating air again?"

"I never was rough on your Dad, or easy on him or anything else," Buzz asserts. "I retired before..." and Roger Jr stares at him as if he's the one with Alzheimers. "Anyway, how's the business?" Buzz tries.

"Which one? Oh, toy company? We sold to Koreans last year and they moved it lock stock and barrel to Jamaica would you believe? They just make the one thing now, Destructo World you probably seen on TV--that flies apart when you say the secret word? Complete junk, I mean complete! And they can't make enough of them."

At that moment the sunlight amplifies frail Cecily and they both look at her. She drools but nonetheless quickens enough to pop: "Say the secret

word and win ten dollars! It's something you hear every day."

Roger whispers "Now she's getting religious or something." But Buzz tells him she had been alluding to a TV quiz show with Groucho Marx. "If you said the secret word a rubber duck dropped down with a Groucho moustache and cigar."

"Yeah, well that's all too intellectual for me. I like sports."

(And Buzz had thought all along that Groucho was mean until he softened with one contestant, a confused man, and was completely kind--*Oh well that's one on me* he remembers telling his wife. In fairness to her, Evvy was in the depths of her PMS as she snapped "Grow up Buzz!")

But he remains hurt, even now in this sunny room of the convalescent hospital, as Groucho consoles, "Buzz, I would never make fun of you."

"Our toys were creative," he tells Groucho...and the alarmingly real Roger Jr.

"Yeah well, spare me that part of any business. I mean, spare me! There's nothing but the bottom line. Forget that and you're ready for a place like this."

Buzz staggers a bit, ashamed he had abstracted for so long and gotten a bit dithery himself. Cecily emits a squeal as Roger Jr hammers on, his shirt entirely out of the front of his pants: "Bottom line's the bottom line the bottom line--didn't somebody say that? Well, it's about a rose or daisy or some such crap but it's the same thing."

Now Cecily tries talking but can't, her head nodding vigorously and her

hands flaying. Some hairs vibrate on her shiny chin and her son blurts, "We ought to have Gillette in here sponsoring *this* show!"

Finally she grates out *secret* and starts on *word*. When she says *love*, Phyllis Heller, blocky LPN, materializes to spin her chair around. "She talking dirty again? Are you, Miriam? Oops, not Miriam! Sorry about that! Miriam got a mouth like a longshoreman!"

But Roger Jr. waves his hand before she can spin Cecily back around to face them again. "It's okay," he tells her. "These Alzheimers pretty much all look the same. Like Japanese cars my competition sells. Anyway, we're through. Stick her on the sundeck."

Back in his room, Buzz, shaking, examines the bundle of cards again. *The reasons we marry can't just be that one and that one alone* the faded brown ink still maintains. *Two paths* he reads from a card, *two paths*, and Buzz sees Cecily, in white, walking by the lake and murmuring over and over *The reasons we marry...*and he grows sick with remembered moonlight and cries softly into the dusk seeping into his room through the half-opened door.

"The secret word...is love" he whispers.

Mrs Lahr interrupts. "Hey! I'll agree to anything, but let there be light! I'm not that cheap that I won't treat you to a little light from time to time." She flicks on a switch and spots the bundle of cards in his hand: "Getting rid of the evidence, hey? Don't mind me. Nosy! I know you kept them all locked up, probably because they were so naughty!"

Buzz suddenly visualizes the inside of his tiny refrigerator, sees icing

aglint in the dark. He pushes the cards away and rises to fetch the ring pastry, in no time frisking to the coffee maker also, dragging a sleeve over his face to wipe a remaining tear or two--an action quietly noted by Mrs Lahr.

"Is that the new light kind?" she inquires.

"No calories at all," winks Buzz, "not a one." His hand is trembling as he cuts, or rather hacks at it, with a butter knife. "I know you'd never lie to me," she laughs.

He sits in his recliner and she on a desk chair by the window as they eat and drink, a dark magnolia looming in back of her squat profile.

After she places her plate and cup and saucer in his small sink, he ventures, "Why go all the way back to your chair? Plenty of room here."

And while bouncing Mrs Lahr on his knee, insofar as he can, a prelude to tugging her back further into the recliner, he will intone with a straight face, "I bet you've never done this before."

And her eyes will assume a glee which contrasts to her usual rosy calm. "Never!"

Pulling off fragments of his remaining pastry to feed him, almost singing: "Let's just do the best we can, Buzz. That's all we can do."